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SUBJECT: THE PLIGHT OF EDUCATION IN THE REGIONS

Summary

¶1. From May 18 -20, Ambassador Yovanovitch traveled to Syunik marz, one of Armenia's 11 provinces, known for its industrial capacity, rich natural resources, and geostrategic importance. Syunik marz aspires to become southern Armenia's regional education hub. During meetings with government officials, civil society representatives, and educators, the Ambassador discussed issues affecting education in the region. Syunik residents recognized that education is the key to economic development and an important aspect of a vibrant civil society. They expressed concern about educational quality and access, and noted a need for improved school conditions, but were unable to articulate a coherent strategy to make their dreams a reality. From what we have heard elsewhere, the situation in Syunik seems to be typical of many, if not all of Armenia's regions. In part because of the lack of support from the central government, educators reiterated the importance of U.S. government programs for their professional development and welcomed continued cooperation. End summary.

Education: Past Glory, Current Struggles

¶2. Syunik, Armenia's southernmost province, shares borders with Iran, Azerbaijan proper, the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhijevan, and the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K). Syunik marz is also southern Armenia's regional education hub. During meetings with government officials, civil society representatives, and educators, the Ambassador discussed issues affecting education in the remote and mountainous region.

¶3. Armenia has a 1600-year legacy of literacy, and formal education has been an important part of Syunik society for centuries. The region is home to several medieval monasteries, and a scholarly center near Tatev is touted in Syunik tourist pamphlets as the "historical center of learning venerated in Armenian society." A Russian royal school was opened in 1882 in Syunik, and Sisian citizens proudly point to the school's founding as an indication of the "region's past scholarly glory." During the 20th century, the burgeoning mining sector attracted French, German and Soviet investment, and Syunik's cities and schools benefitted from foreign language instruction and other educational improvement.

¶4. The region has suffered since independence, however, as a result of armed conflict with Azerbaijan and from a lack of transportation and communication infrastructure, all of which have negatively impacted Syunik schools. Like most rural regions of Armenia, student enrollment in Syunik marz has sharply declined as families move to the capital or migrate abroad, and education budgets in villages are shrinking. Syunik's isolation has made it especially difficult for local governments to recruit qualified teachers. Rural children, called upon to assist with agrarian work, are at risk of not completing secondary school.

Education as a Tool of Development

¶5. Government and civil society leaders in Syunik have increasingly viewed the education sphere as an area for renewed development. At a roundtable discussion with the Ambassador, a Sisian civil society leader commented, "Universities in Syunik can play an important role in decreasing rates of migration, especially among youth. They can unite intellectuals and promote scientific progress." They are also

a tool for improving the economy in the region. Syunik marz is the heart of Armenia's mining sector, but declining copper prices and long term concerns over the sustainability of mining have led many of the region's leaders to consider diversifying.

¶6. The mayor of Goris, Nelson Voskanyan, is promoting the city as "southern Armenia's answer to quality education," and intends to recruit students from abroad. He added, "Education is key to this city's success. Students who come here boost the economy. Goris does not have the industry that other cities have. Education is our industry." Nara Petrosyan, a Kapan small business owner said "Syunik has always been known for its high education level, but we need more investment in education to increase the region's development." Mayor Arthur Atayan highlighted new kindergartens in Kapan as an economic investment in the future, and Sisian teachers emphasized that Syunik should take advantage of the financial benefit that tuition might confer to the region, noting that 70 percent of Armenian students go on to higher education. "Of course," noted Director of Education for Sisian Schools Varos Simonyan, "it would be good for students too. Those who are well educated make their way in life."

Education as a Tool of Democracy

¶7. Syunik civil society leaders also stated that education in the region is an important "tool of democracy" that allows citizens access to information about their rights and responsibilities. NGO leaders in Goris work in close cooperation with international organizations and USAID on civic education programs, promoting education reforms, and teaching volunteerism. In Kapan, the Ambassador met with Syunik Civil Society Development Center (CSDC) members, who noted that the group works to educate the population about their rights and also sponsors a legal clinic, the only NGO in the country with law student apprenticeships.

Education as a Quality Product

¶8. With tremendous emphasis placed on education as a regional economic development tool and as a guarantor of civic participation, Syunik citizens also stress the need for improved educational quality. As CSDC head Tigran Stepanyan noted, "Everyone talks about education. It is 'the fashion,' but it is also our future, and quality is an issue." Peace Corps volunteers in Kapan noted that families in their community "worry a lot about schooling. Quality of education is a top concern."

¶9. Syunik teachers noted the lack of technical equipment and supplies as a barrier to quality education. Naira Stepanyan, Director of School 4 in Sisian, stated that her school "can't properly teach chemistry, biology or physics" because she does not have supplies for lab experiments. Hovik Aleksanyan, Director of Sisian School 5, added that he needs more computers if students are to compete in Yerevan and abroad. He said, "There is only one computer per 40 students. How can students advance without technological skills? We need resources if we are going to develop." Gohar Sargsyan, Director of Sisian School 1 expressed concern about school facilities, stating, "The school is old and classrooms uninspiring. Good conditions are motivating to students. Cold classrooms and a broken staircase are not the way to progress."

Access to Education

¶10. Access to education was another commonly expressed concern, especially in the recruitment of qualified teachers for regional schools and programs. Only 78 percent of Syunik teachers have specialized education, and regional universities cannot meet the demand for professors and specialists with graduate degrees. A Syunik accountant told the Ambassador that she wanted to be trained as a CPA, but could not find a suitable program in the marz. She added, "Schools in the capital need to branch out and offer programs here. I can't just pack up and go to the capital when my life is here. It's just not practical." Falling education budgets and

family incomes have likewise made it more difficult for rural families to enroll children in school. Enrollment rates in Syunik are some of the highest in Armenia, but pressure to help with family farming or earn income abroad has meant declining graduation rates as young men leave school to work.

Education as a Tool of Mutual Understanding

¶11. Where government and civic leaders in Syunik have noted positive strides in education, they have discussed the important role the U.S. government has played in securing such opportunities. Syunik residents highlighted U.S. exchange programs and English language instruction in particular.

¶12. The Armenian Apostolic Bishop of Syunik marz spoke with the Ambassador about the important role of educational exchange in the region. He has invested significant funds in a regional university, and stated that support provided by a school in Texas has "ensured students are being trained in modern agricultural practices." In Sisian, many school directors eagerly discussed their U.S. government exchange program participation in either Project Harmony or Teaching Excellence and Achievement programs, stating that it had "ensured our success" and that they "still draw from the experience."

¶13. English language instruction in Syunik is also highly praised. The English Language Teaching Center in Goris noted their work with Peace Corps volunteers, saying that they offer English language courses and specialist training. Sisian directors also said that Peace Corps volunteers working in Sisian schools have "introduced innovative techniques" and have "been instrumental in the creation of a language lab."

¶14. The Ambassador thanked Syunik residents for their frank assessment of education challenges and developments in the region, and encouraged leaders to seek further opportunities for cooperation. She noted, "Teaching unlocks the potential in each child," and thanked educators for their service.

Comment

¶15. Although everyone lamented the current condition of educational establishments in Syunik, no one offered a clear idea of a way forward, other than to put more money into infrastructure and materials available for primary and secondary educational institutions. Although the political leaders with whom we met appeared to aspire to reasserting Syunik's status as a regional hub for higher education, no one seems to have thought about what fields of study might be suitable for the region. In the absence of a clear strategy, and in the tight budget environment faced by the Armenian government, there seems little hope for realizing their dream. End comment.

YOVANOVITCH